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ABSTRACT

In order to document the self-directed, spontaneous growth in literary output of a six-year-old child, her writings during a one month period were collected and compiled. It was discovered that the child used writing to organize knowledge about the environment and the operations of print, to maintain personal relations, to establish impersonal or business contacts, to express personal needs, to entertain herself and others, and to experiment with what she was learning. It was also discovered that artwork that previously had been an obvious, detailed accompaniment to her writing diminished to unrelated watercolors or simple illustrations. It is theorized that this de-emphasis on artwork allowed her to focus all her energies on refining the writing process. This study supports research results that emphasis reading and writing as complementary activities. (CRH)

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A Month in the Life of a Writing Six-Year-Old

Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English
Spring Conference, Columbus, Ohio
April 13, 1984

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A Month in the Life of a Writing Six-Year-Old

Marcia Baghban

Many theorists see reading and writing activities as complementary in instructional settings (Goodman, 1970; Burke, 1972; Moffett and Wagner, 1976; Paul, 1976; Clay, 1977; Hildreth, 1963; and Carroll, 1966), and studies of natural readers emphasize the youngsters' consistent interest in writing as an exploratory activity to accompany reading (Durkin, 1966, 1974-1975). Certainly efforts to construct a workable model of the language arts result in the application of similar learning strategies and shared experiences.

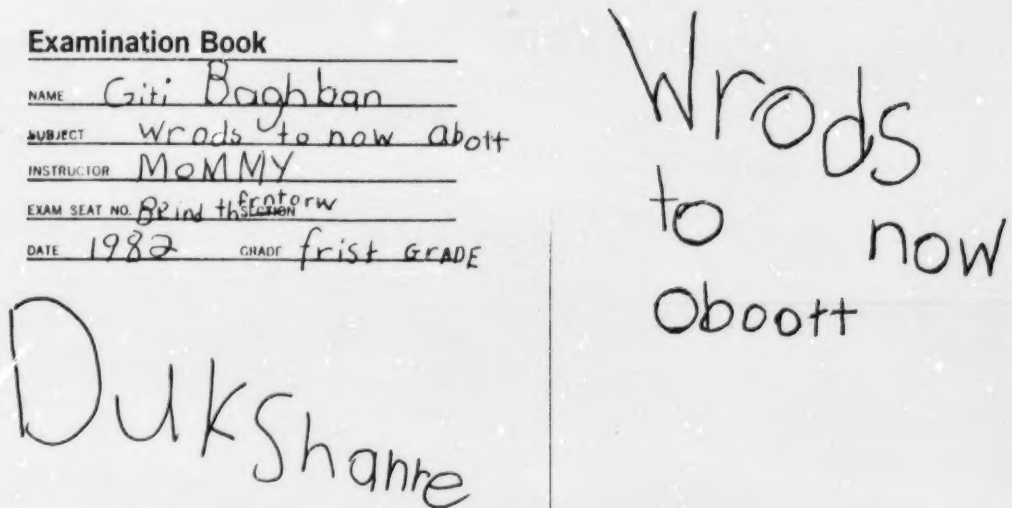
Parent observations that their early readers do not make out the sounds of letters and work out words "pronouncing like a child", but rather reading "just click(s)" (Clark, 1976), holds true for our daughter Giti and for many of her friends. In fact, the most common expression parents use to describe their children's reading is that it just "took off". This observation may be informally documented in the acquisition of reading as a process and is worthwhile localizing in the act of learning to write as well. While our daughter Giti had been busy writing from the time she was 17 months old, within the four weeks of October 1982, just two months after her sixth birthday, the time she devoted to writing, the volume of samples she produced, and her knowledge of the uses of print became so overwhelming that as a parent-observer, I can only document this month as the time she "took off" writing.

In environments that immerse children in samples of print and allow them time and freedom to formulate and test hypotheses about written language, children construct roles not only for the form of their written products, but also for various functions. They write lists, notes, letters, stories, books, and signs to demonstrate the differing formats for their expressions, similar

TO DEVELOPING REGISTERS IN SPEECH. TO KEEP THE CHILDREN WRITING, ADULTS ARE ADMONISHED TO READ THEIR PRODUCTS FOR THE MESSAGE THEY CARRY RATHER THAN FOR CONFORMITY TO GRAPHIC CONVENTIONS (CLAY, 1975).

ONE USE FOR WRITING WHICH GITI CONSISTENTLY DEMONSTRATES IS THE ORGANIZATION OF WHAT IS KNOWN. BEING AN AVID READER AND SEEING ADULTS USE THE DICTIONARY, SHE DECIDES TO MAKE ONE OF HER OWN. SHE TAKES A BLUE EXAM BOOK FROM HER PAPER SUPPLY, FILLS IN THE COVER, MAKES A TITLE PAGE, AND LISTS THE WORDS WHICH CAME TO HER, ALWAYS NUMBERING THE PAGE AS SHE MOVES ON TO THE NEXT. HER DICTIONARY TOTALS 17 TERMS ON SEVEN PAGES.

FIGURE 1



Doll

Something

that little girls play with

Pet

to have fun with

Box

Something that you carry things in

Doll

Sometiging

that liteed grills ~~pay~~ with

Pat

to have

fun with

Box

Someing

tate You

Care things in

1

Cup

Someing

~~that you druk out of~~

t.v.

Someing that you wach

House

Someing that you like in

2

Car

Someing that you drive

lamp

Someing

So you can see

Pizza Hut

Peisa Hut

a restaurant

a Rastr Rant

3

Book

Soming that

You Reed

Soda

Soming

that You Drink

4

Nite
when
It is
Dark

toys
it is Someing
that litle boy's
And Girls
play
With

5

Pen

paN

Something

Someing

that you

that You

write with

Rite With

~~Chair~~

Chair

Chair

Someing

Something

that you

that you

sit (on)

S Site

6

Rocks

Something

that

is rough.

Bed

Someing

that you lie

on

Rooks

Someing

that

is Raff.

7

The

End

A DIFFERENT CATALOGUING TECHNIQUE WHICH GITI ENJOYS IS COPYING AND COMPOSING RECIPES. ALTHOUGH PROFICIENT AT BOTH FRUIT AND VEGETABLE SALAD-MAKING, HERE SHE TAKES A PAPER PLATE AND FOCUSES ON HER VEGETABLE SALAD OF LETTUCE AND CARROTS, AT THE TIME THE ONLY RAW VEGETABLES SHE PREFERRED.

FIGURE 2

Favorite

Salad

1. Take a bowl
2. Take a head of lettuce
3. Chop up the lettuce
4. Put (it) in the bowl
5. Chop up carrots
6. Put (them) in the bowl
7. Put on French Dressing

Now Eat!

OTHER ORGANIZING ACTIVITIES INCLUDE TAKING ORDERS FOR MEALS, MAKING TELEPHONE LISTS AND BOOKS, GRADING SCHOOL PAPERS, AND DRAWING STICKERS AND THE PIECES OF MONEY SHE UNDERSTANDS.

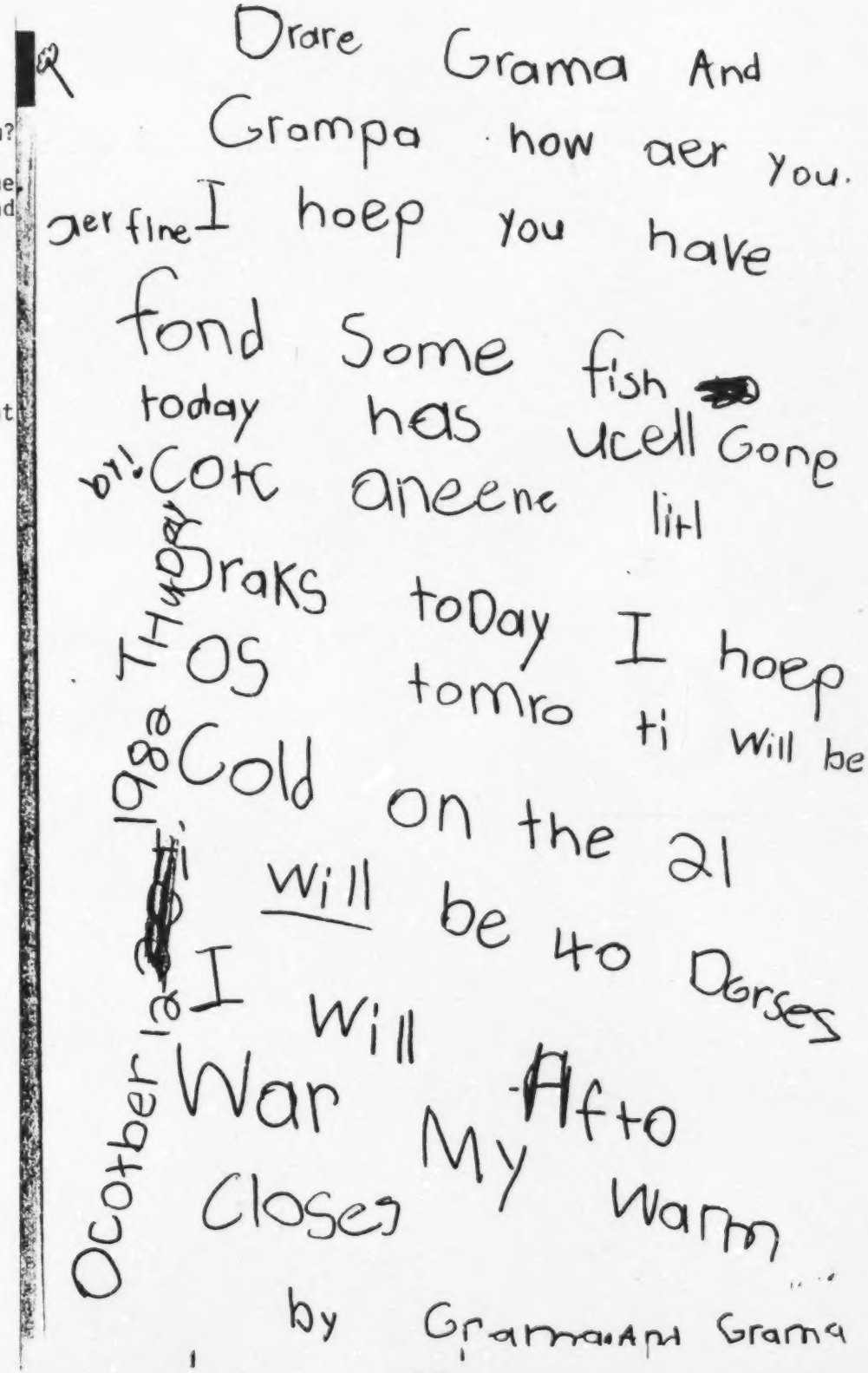
A SECOND MAJOR FUNCTION FOR WRITING WHICH GITI DEMONSTRATES INVOLVES SOCIAL RELATIONS. THIS CATEGORY MAY BE SUBDIVIDED FIRST INTO: THE MAINTENANCE OF PERSONAL RELATIONS. HER BRIEF NOTES TO GRANDPARENTS AFTER THEIR VISIT ARE FOLLOWED BY A MUCH LONGER, WELL-DEVELOPED LETTER.

FIGURE 3

Dera Grama
I hoep you aer
hevg a good
time I love you
from Giti

Dear Grampa
I hoep you
aer hareg a
good time wihth
Grama I love
you
from Giti

FIGURE 4


Drare Grama And
Grampa how aer you.
aer fine I hoep you have
fond Some fish
today has ucell Gone
bi: Cotc aneene litl
THuRday Draks toDay I hoep
1988 OS tomro ti Will be
Cold on the 21
I Will be 40 Dorses
October 21 War Afto
Closes My Warm
by Grama And Grama

Dear Grandma and Grandpa, How are you?

(I hope you) are fine. I hope you have found some fish today.

Has Uncle John caught any little snakes today? I hope so.

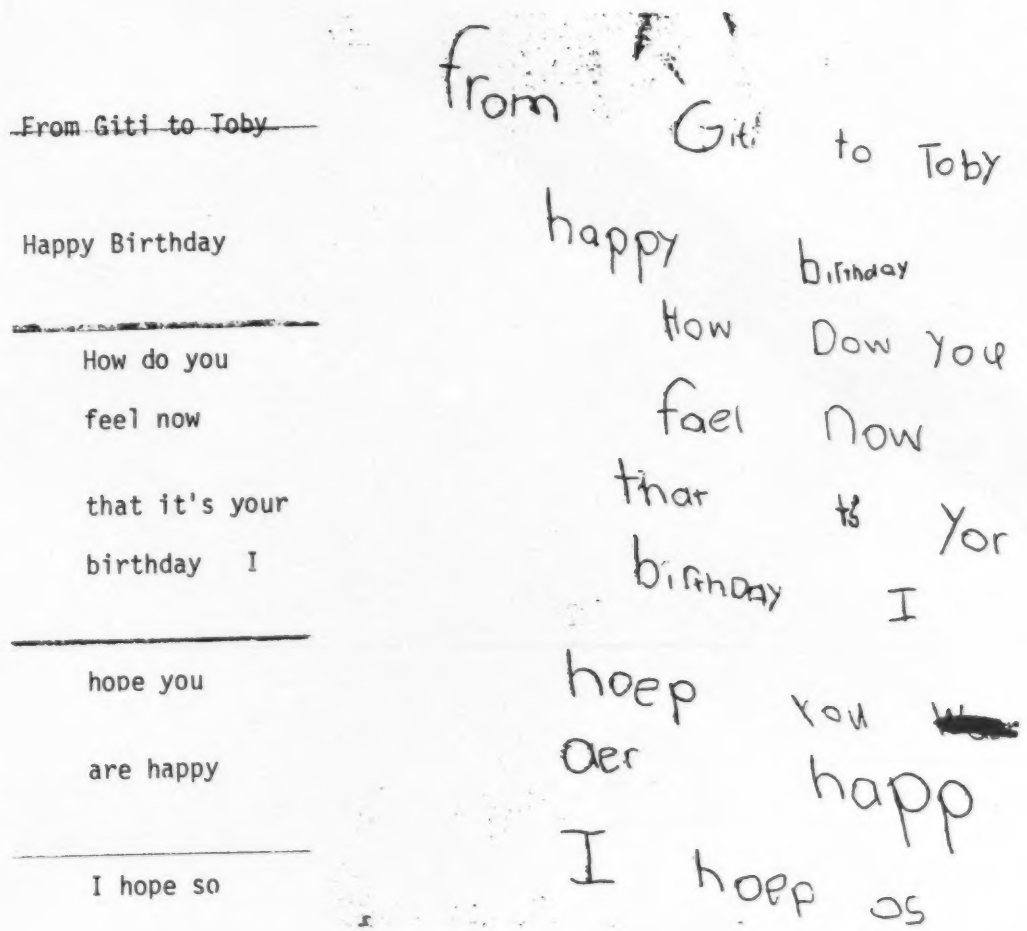
Tomorrow it will be cold. On the 21st(it) will be 40 degrees.

I will have to wear my warm clothes.

...andma and ...andpa.

SHE COMPOSES A BIRTHDAY CARD TO A FAMILY FRIEND.

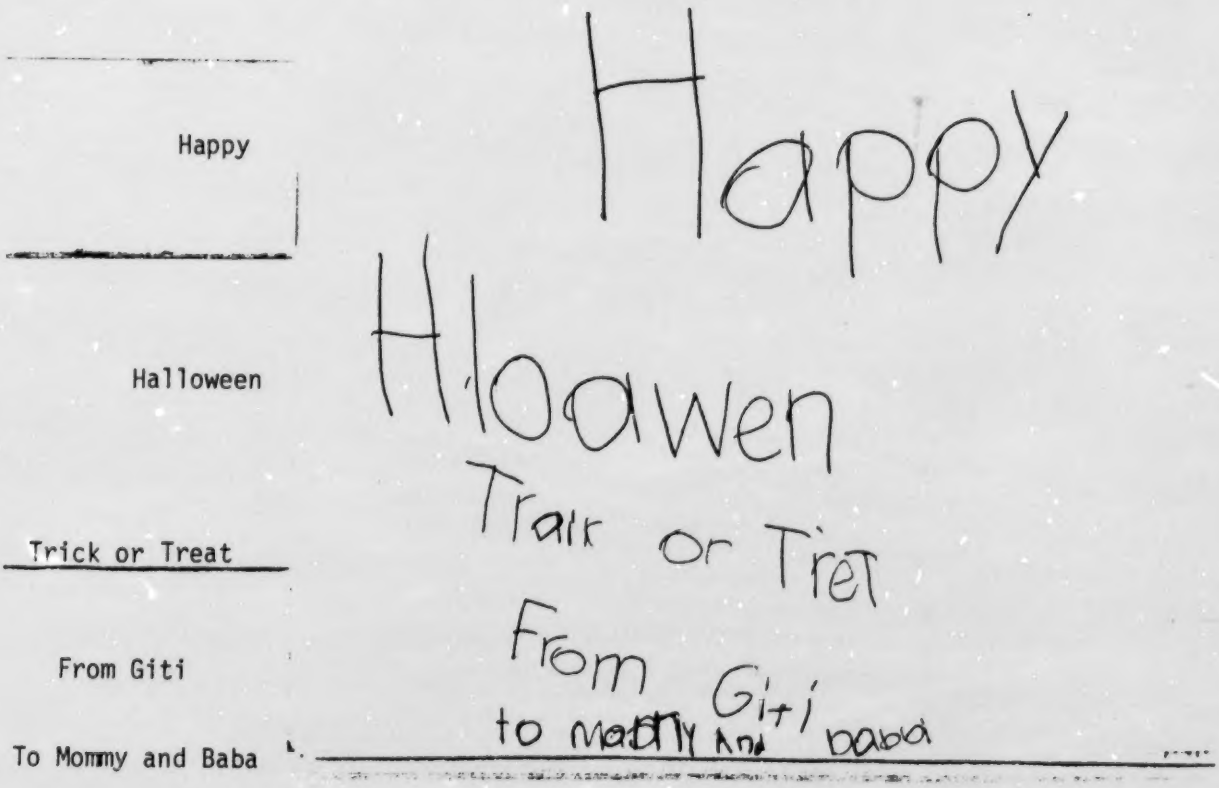
FIGURE 5



11.

AS SCHOOL FESTIVITIES FOR HALLOWEEN ARE DISCUSSED AND COSTUMES AND CANDY FILL THE STORES, SHE BEGINS TO MAKE HALLOWEEN CARDS.

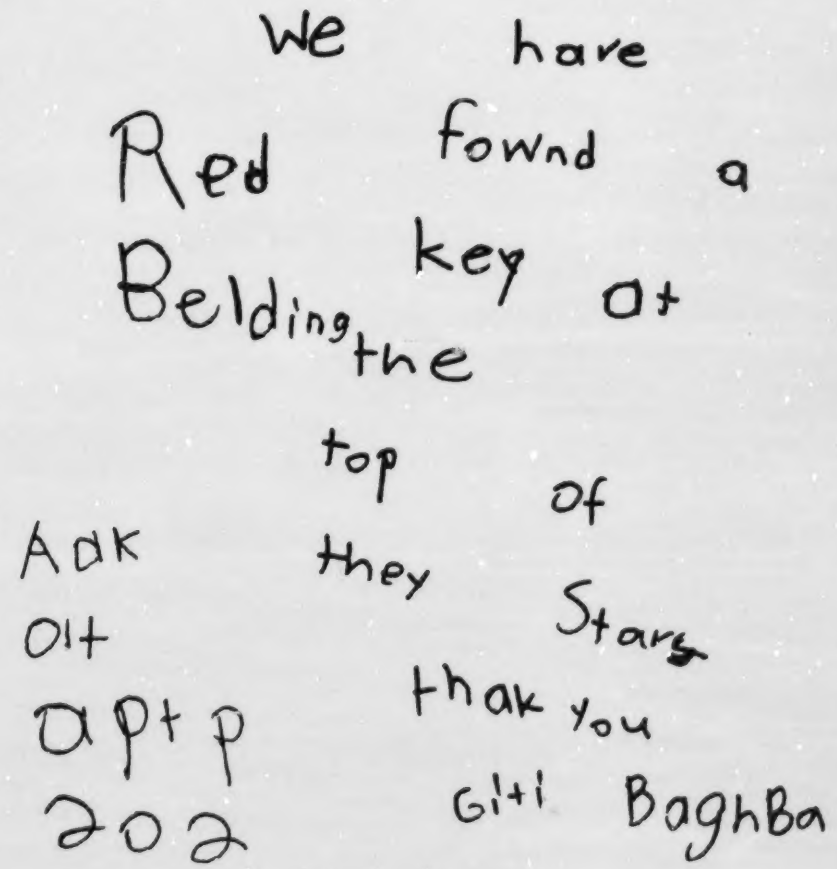
FIGURE 6



IN ADDITION TO MAINTAINING PERSONAL RELATIONS, GITI CAN ALSO USE WRITING FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF IMPERSONAL CONTACTS. SHE MAKES RECEIPTS FOR PACKAGES AND REGISTERED MAIL, AND WHEN SHE FINDS AN APARTMENT KEY INSIDE OUR BUILDING, SHE RUSHES HOME TO MAKE A NOTE TO PUT ON THE HALL DOOR SO THAT THE OWNER MAY CLAIM THE KEY.

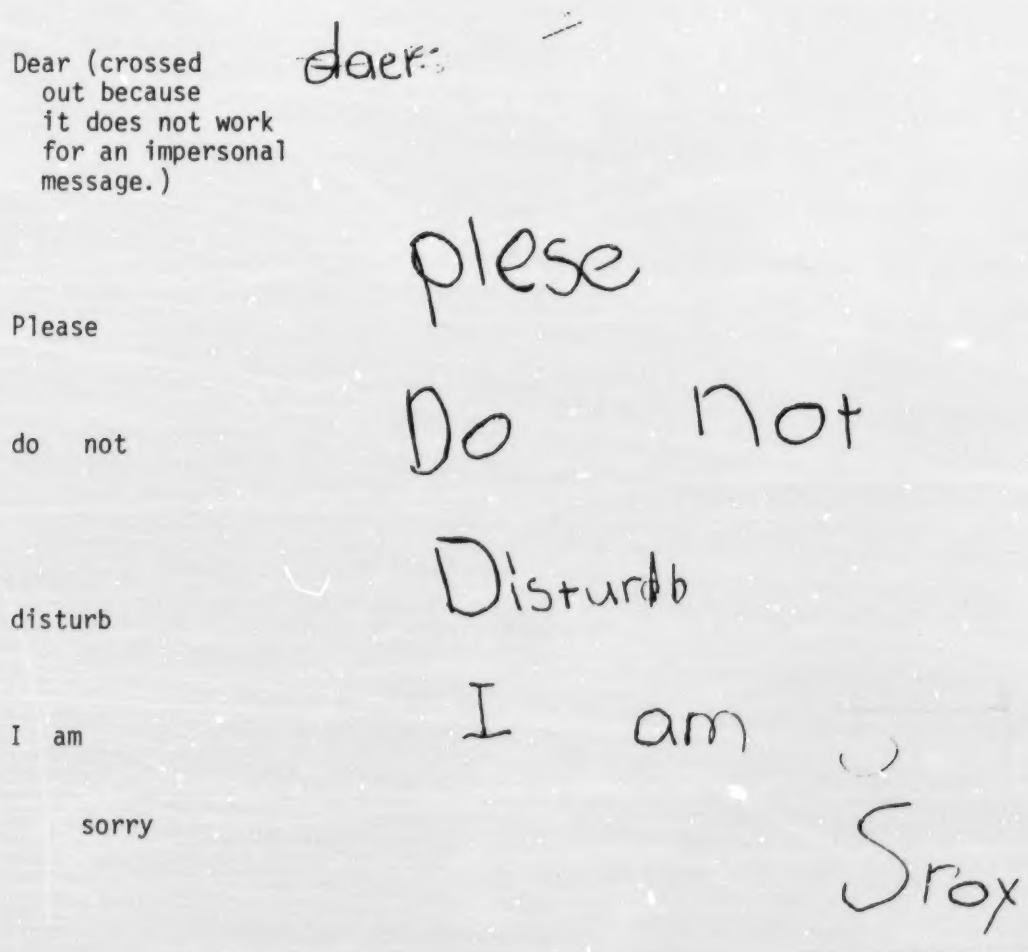
FIGURE 7

We have
found a
Red
Building
(The
building has
~~red trim.~~)
key at
the
top of
the stairs
Ask
at
Thank you
at
202
~~Giti Baghban~~



MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THE THERAPEUTIC USES OF READING THROUGH SUCH TECHNIQUES AS BIBLIOTHERAPY. IT IS IMPORTANT THAT WE SHOULD NOT OVERLOOK THE EMOTIONAL VALUE OF WRITING AS WELL. EACH OF US MAY RELEASE TENSION AND EXPRESS FRUSTRATIONS THROUGH WRITING WHEN WORDS FAIL. IN THE FOLLOWING EXAMPLES, GITI DEMONSTRATES HER PERSONAL NEEDS THROUGH THE INEVITABLE VERSIONS OF "DO NOT DISTURB" WHICH WERE POSTED ON HER BEDROOM DOOR.

FIGURE 8



BECUASE WRITING IS SO INDIVIDUAL, THE VERY ACT OF COMPOSING INVOLVES ENTERTAINMENT, AND IS THEREFORE SELF-REINFORCING. IN THIS ONE MONTH, GITI WROTE FOR HER PERSONAL PLEASURE FIVE BOOKS, FOUR POEMS, AND ONE STORY. HERE IS JUST ONE EXAMPLE FROM HER UNDERSTANDING OF GENRES.

FIGURE 9
A POEM

Houses

I love my house
it shines and glitters
in the snow. In back
of my house there
is a playground where
I play on hot summer
days.

house's
I love my house
it Shin's and gllters
in the Snow in baak
of My hovee trea
is a play grond ware
I play on hot Samer
Day's
the. End
by Giti

ENTERTAINMENT IS HEADY. WE ENJOY SHARING THE EXPERIENCE WITH OTHERS. GITI NOT ONLY SHARED HER BOOKS AND POEMS, BUT CREATED A MAGIC PUPPET SHOW FOR HER PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS, COMPLETE WITH AN ANNOUNCEMENT (FIGURE 10), INVITATIONS (FIGURE 11), AND SEATING ASSIGNMENTS (FIGURE 12).

FIGURE 10

ANNOUNCEMENT

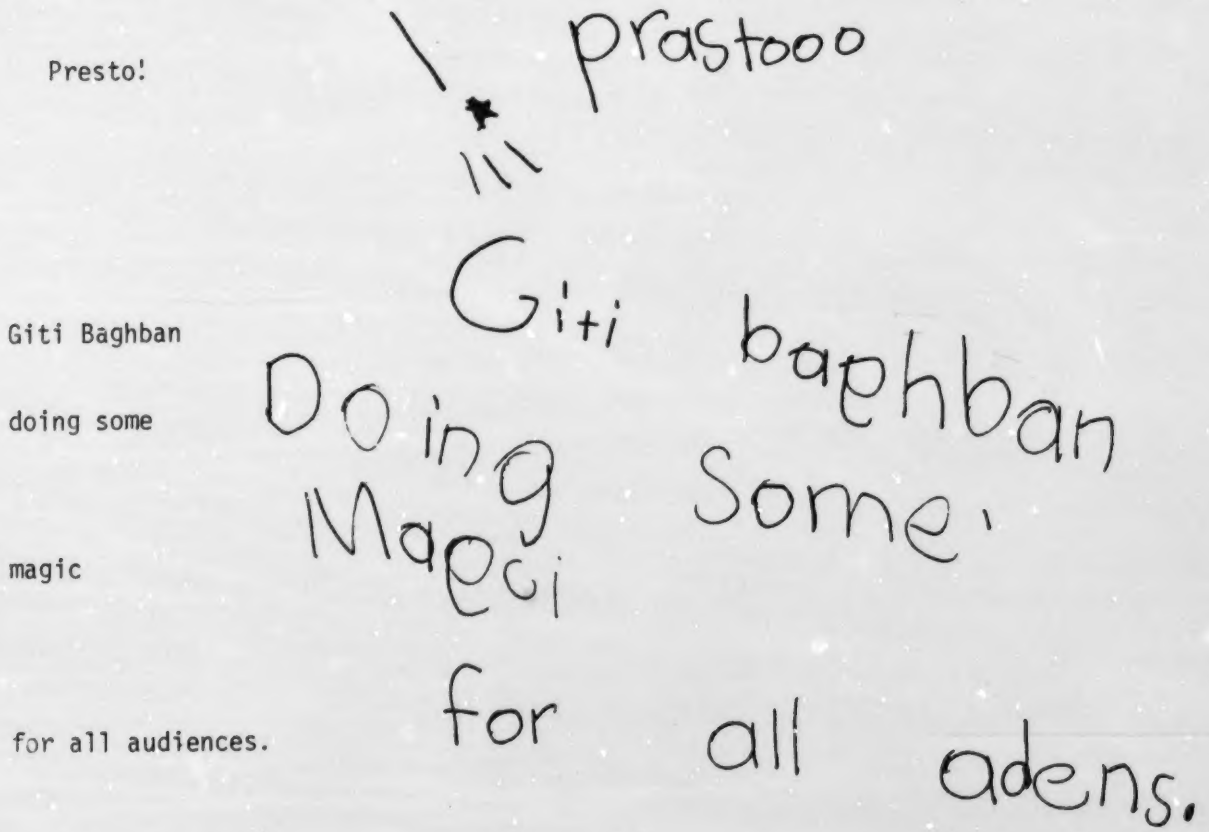


FIGURE 11

INVITATION TO GRANDPA

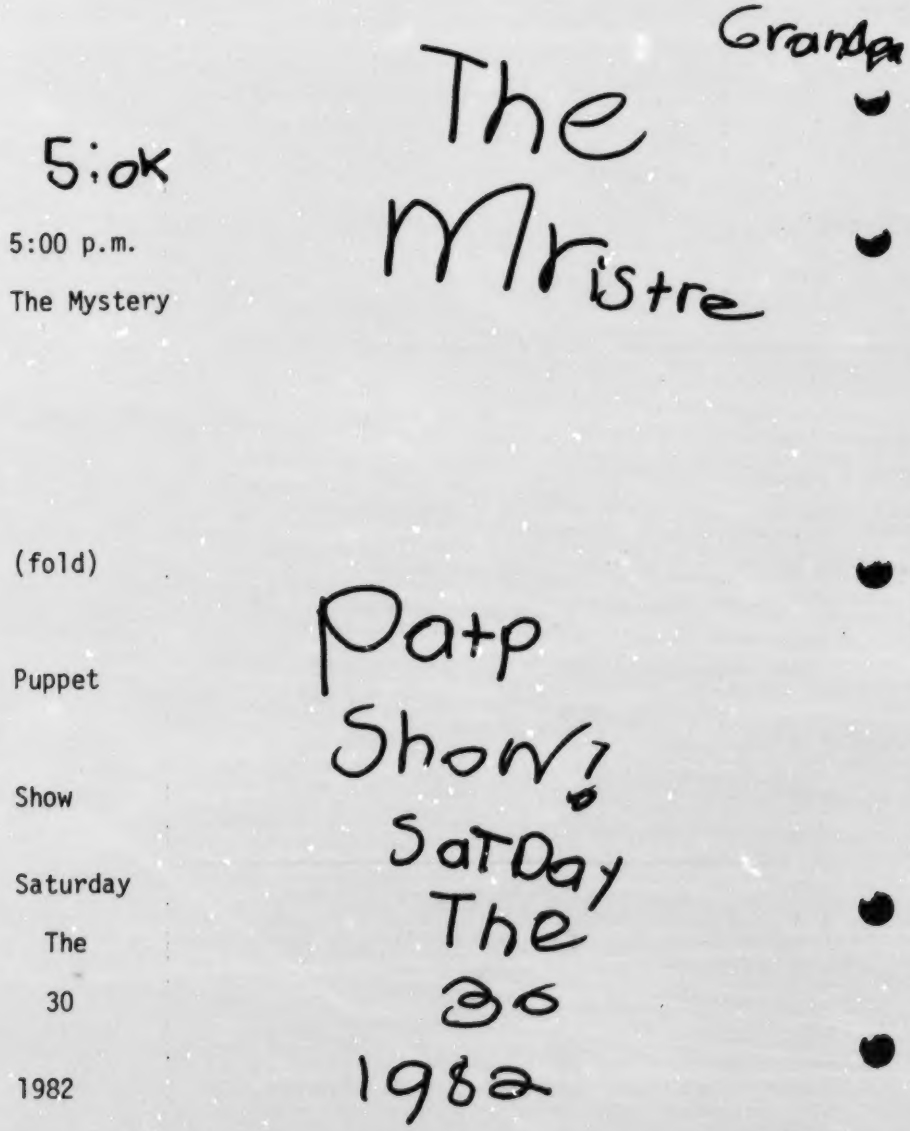
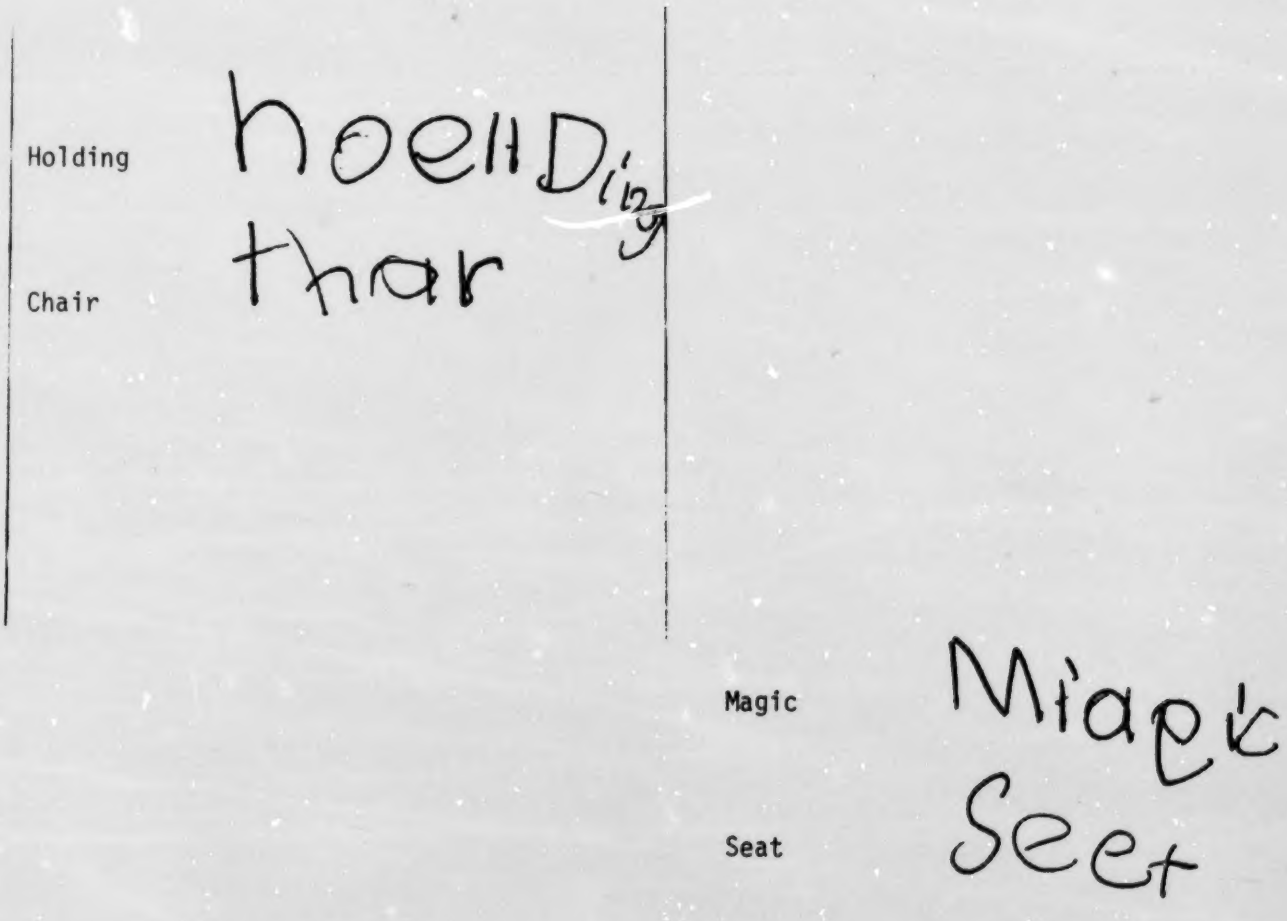


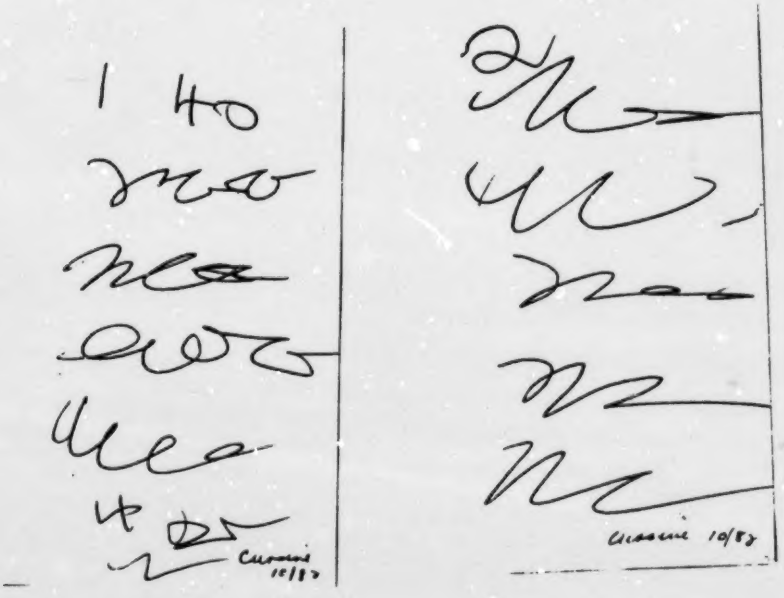
FIGURE 12

SEAT MARKERS



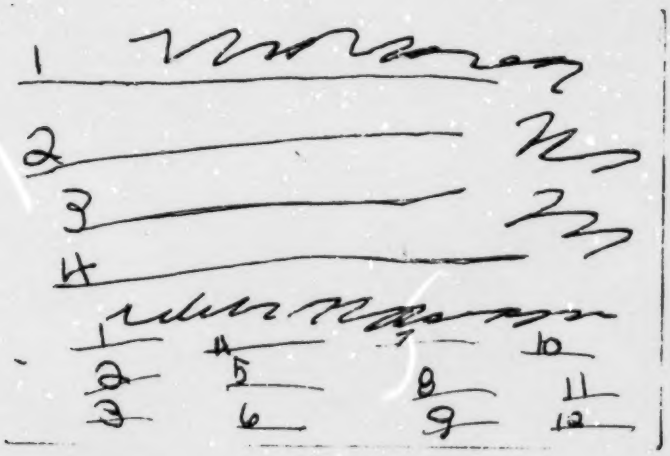
FRANK SMITH (1975) STATES THAT THE LEARNING OF LITERACY INVOLVES THE CREATION OF "A THEORY OF THE WORLD IN THE HEAD", AND THEORISTS (BURKE, 1972; DURKIN, 1966; GOODMAN, 1970; MOFFETT AND WAGNER, 1976) EMPHASIZE THAT READING AND WRITING PLAY OFF AND REINFORCE EACH OTHER AS CONSTRUCTIVE LINGUISTIC PROCESSES. IF THESE OBSERVATIONS ARE ACCURATE, THEN ANY LEARNER MUST DEMONSTRATE NOT ONLY WHAT SHE UNDERSTANDS, BUT ALSO HER EXPERIMENTATION WITH WHAT SHE IS IN THE PROCESS OF UNDERSTANDING. TYPICAL OF MANY FIRST GRADERS, GITI WAS FASCINATED WITH CURSIVE WRITING AND PRODUCED FOUR PAPERS REPRESENTING HER VERSIONS OF CONNECTED LETTERS.

FIGURE 13



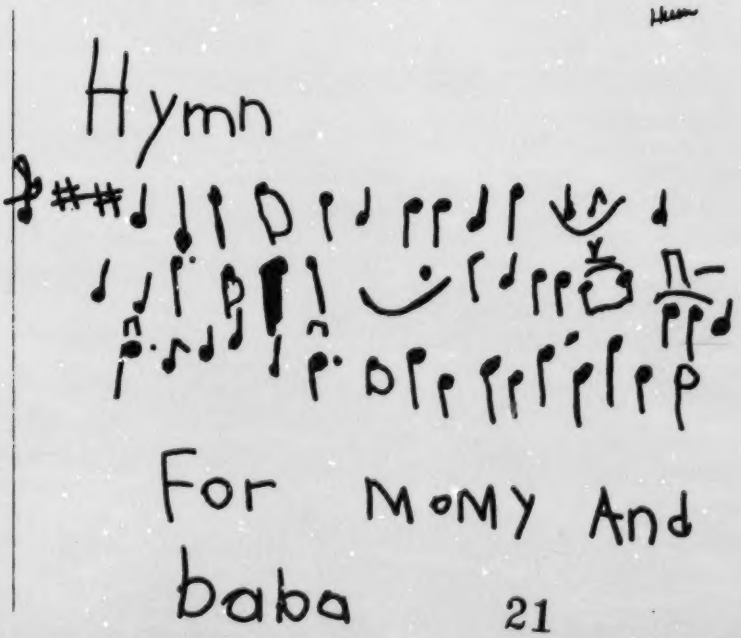
SHE WAS EXPOSED TO MONEY AND MADE HER OWN.

FIGURE 14



AS A VIOLINIST OF TWO MONTHS, GITI WAS FASCINATED BY THE EXPOSURE TO A NEW SYMBOL SYSTEM AND WROTE ONE BOOK OF MUSIC AND FOUR SEPARATE SONGS ACCORDING TO HER UNDERSTANDING OF MUSIC AT THE TIME. ONE EXAMPLE IS THE FOLLOWING WHICH SHE ENTITLED, "HUM".

FIGURE 15



IN SUMMARY THEN, GITI USES WRITING TO ORGANIZE WHAT SHE KNOWS ABOUT THE WORLD AND THE OPERATIONS OF PRINT, TO MAINTAIN PERSONAL RELATIONS, TO ESTABLISH IMPERSONAL OR BUSINESS CONTACTS, TO EXPRESS PERSONAL NEEDS, TO ENTERTAIN HERSELF AND OTHERS, AND TO EXPERIMENT WITH WHAT SHE IS LEARNING. MOST OF THESE SAMPLES SHE RAN TO US READING, OTHERS SHE MERELY ASKED US TO KEEP, SOME SHE DELIVERED AND LEFT, AND A FEW WE SIMPLY FOUND AROUND THE HOUSE.

INTERESTINGLY, IN LONGER OBSERVATIONS OF GITI (BAGHBAN, 1979), ARTWORK WAS ALWAYS AN OBVIOUS, DETAILED ACCOMPANIMENT TO HER WRITING, AS IT IS WITH MANY YOUNGSTERS. DURING THIS MONTH, HOWEVER, DRAWING TOOK A BACKSEAT TO HER OVERWHELMING INTEREST IN WRITING, APPEARING ONLY OCCASIONALLY AS UNRELATED WATERCOLORS OR VERY SIMPLE ILLUSTRATIONS IN THREE OF HER BOOKS. APPARENTLY ALL HER ENERGIES WERE NEEDED TO FOCUS STRONGLY ON REFINING THE WRITING PROCESS.

* * * * *

THE WEALTH AND VARIETY OF DATA COLLECTED IN JUST ONE MONTH IN THE LIFE OF OUR SIX-YEAR-OLD EMPHASIZE HOW MUCH WE NEED TO REMIND OURSELVES TO NEVER UNDERESTIMATE CHILDREN AS LEARNERS. AS I LOOK OVER GITI'S SCHOOL PRODUCTS FROM THIS SAME THIME PERIOD, I CAN ONLY REMARK THAT SHE APPEARS BARELY LITERATE. IF SUCH A YOUNG LEARNER CAN DIRECT HER OWN PROGRESS AND USE WHAT SHE HAS LEARNED TO GAIN CONTROL OF WHAT SHE IS LEARNING, THEN THE LEAST EACH OF US CAN DO AS THE ADULTS IN HER LIFE IS TO KEEP THE MEANING INHERENT IN ORAL AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE INTERACTION ALIVE--BOTH AT HOME AND IN CLASSROOMS--AND THE PLEASURE THAT COMES FROM THE UNDERSTANDING OF SUCH INTERACTIONS.

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